(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau

(43) International Publication Date
13 September 2001 (13.09.2001)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 01/67231 A2

(51) International Patent Classification[7]: G06F 7/58

(21) International Application Number: PCT/EP01/02428

(22) International Filing Date: 5 March 2001 (05.03.2001)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
09/519,549 6 March 2000 (06.03.2000) US

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(81) Designated States *(national)*: CN, JP, KR.

(84) Designated States *(regional)*: European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR).

Published:
— *without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report*

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR GENERATING RANDOM NUMBERS USING FLIP-FLOP META-STABILITY

(57) Abstract: A method and apparatus are disclosed for generating random numbers using the meta-stable behavior of flip-flops. A flip-flop is clocked with an input that deliberately violates the setup or hold times (or both) of the flip-flop to ensure meta-stable behavior. The meta-stable operation of the flip-flop provides a mechanism for generating random numbers. The delayed input to the flip-flop causes the meta-stable output of the flip-flop to be asynchronous with the clock source. Thus, a synchronizing circuit is disclosed to synchronize the meta-stable output of the flip-flop with the clock source. The synchronized output of the flip-flop is compared to an input waveform to determine if the output signal does not match the input signal, indicating a meta-stable state. When a meta-stable event is detected an output bit is provided as a random bit. A second embodiment utilizes the time delay between mistakes to generate a random number. A third embodiment assumes that meta-stability occurs mostly on zeroes (or ones) for a given class of flip-flops and obtains an even random number distribution by "marking" half of the zeroes as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes." In addition, half of the ones are marked as "ones" and the other half of the ones are marked as "zeroes." A fourth embodiment account for process variations by adjusting the delay between the clock and the input to cause the meta-stable behavior more often. A fifth embodiment utilizes multiple circuits with n different flip-flops so that at least one of the n circuits will be meta-stable at a given time.

WO 01/67231 A2

Method and apparatus for generating random numbers using flip-flop meta-stability

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to random number generation, and more particularly, to a method and apparatus for generating random numbers using flip-flop meta-stability.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Flip-flops and latches are widely used in computers and other electronic devices, for example, as sampling, counting and storage elements. A number of flip-flop types have been developed, such as D-type flip-flops ("data"), R-S latches ("reset and set"), J-K flip-flops (having J and K inputs) and T flip-flops (having only one input). A D-type flip-flop, for example, is a clocked flip-flop whose output is delayed by one clock pulse.

A conventional R-S latch 100 is shown in FIG. 1A. As in FIG. 1A, the R-S latch 100 is comprised of two NOR gates 110 and 120. The outputs of the two NOR gates 110, 120 are cross-connected to a respective input of the opposite NOR gate. Thus, NOR gate 110 receives the output of NOR gate 120 and a reset signal, R, as inputs. Likewise, NOR gate 120 receives the output of NOR gate 110 and the set signal, S, as inputs.

More recently, the simple latches shown in FIG. 1A have been replaced by edge-triggered flip-flops, such as the D-type flip-flop 150 is shown in FIG. 1B. Edge-triggered flip-flops change state based on a rising or falling clock edge and a data input. A conventional D-type flip-flop 150 is shown in FIG. 1B. Such D-type flip-flops are often used to detect the logic state of an asynchronous digital signal having an unpredictable timing relative to the clock signal. A synchronous signal is applied to the clock input, CLK, of the flip-flop 150, while a digital logic level of the asynchronous signal to be detected is directed to the D input. The detected signal is then produced on the Q output line. Thereafter, the flip-flop 150 simply changes state whenever the input signal at the D input is changed (so long as the reset signal is tied permanently to ground).

It is well-known that the latches 100 shown in FIG. 1A are susceptible to meta-stability. For a detailed discussion of meta-stability, see, for example, Application Note, A Meta-Stability Primer, AN219, Philips Semiconductors (Nov. 15, 1989),

incorporated by reference herein. Generally, meta-stability can occur when both inputs to a latch 100 are set at a high logic value ("11"), and are then reset to a low logic value ("00"). Under these conditions, the latch outputs can oscillate unpredictably in a statistically known manner. In theory, the latch 100 can oscillate indefinitely. In practice, however, the latch 100 will randomly shift and arrive at a random output value of either logic low or high. Typically, these meta-stable values are subsequently detected by other circuitry in a given application and can be interpreted as different logic level states.

In addition, the edge-triggered flip-flop 150 shown in FIG. 1B can become meta-stable when the setup or hold times of the flip-flop are violated. Edge-triggered flip-flops 150 are susceptible to meta-stability because inside every edge-triggered flip-flop 150 there is a latch 100 being fed by the edge detection circuitry. If the setup or hold times are violated then the internal latch 100 will observe inputs that can trigger the meta-stable state.

For most applications, especially those requiring reliable detection of the logic level state of an asynchronous signal, such meta-stable behavior is undesirable. Thus, a number of techniques have been proposed or suggested to provide flip-flops that are not susceptible to meta-stability. Philips Semiconductors of Sunnyvale, CA, for example, provides a family of integrated circuits that exhibit meta-stable immune characteristics. See, for example, Application Note, Synchronizing and Clock Driving Solutions – Using the 74F50XXX Family, AN220, Philips Semiconductors (Sept., 1989), incorporated by reference herein. In addition, United States Patent Number 5,365,122, issued to Rackley, discloses a meta-stable resistant R-S latch.

Many applications and electronic devices require random numbers, including games of chance, such as poker, roulette, and slot machines. In particular, numerous cryptographic algorithms and protocols depend on a non-predictable source of random numbers to implement secure electronic communications and the like. There are numerous devices available for generating a random number. A number of factors are important in evaluating a random number generator. For example, it is desirable that the random number generator can generate every possible permutation in the designated range of numbers. In addition, the random number generator should not be biased and should generate any given number with the same probability as any other number. Moreover, the random number generator should generate random numbers that cannot be predicted, irrespective of the size of the collection of previous results. Thus, the random numbers should be completely unpredictable and non-susceptible to outside influences. Therefore, ideal random number generators have used forces in nature, such as radioactive decay or analog noise in zener

diodes, as the source of randomness. These devices are essentially perfect in that natural forces can neither be predicted nor influenced.

Many computer-generated random numbers are easily predictable, thus leading to the failure of secure systems or games of chance. Hardware-based random number generators have typically been constructed using analog devices that make integration on digital integrated circuits difficult. In addition, they have often been temperamental in terms of reacting to noise in power supplies and local electronic noise in computer systems. Thus, such generators have not been cost effective for implementation in many systems, such as smart cards or typical personal computers.

A need therefore exists for a method and apparatus for generating random numbers that can utilize only digital technology and consists of very few gates. This will allow easy integration of the random number generator into any product that could benefit from it.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Generally, a method and apparatus are disclosed for generating random numbers using the meta-stable behavior of flip-flops. According to a first embodiment of the invention, a flip-flop is clocked with an input that deliberately violates the setup or hold times (or both) of the flip-flop to ensure meta-stable behavior. The meta-stable operation of the flip-flop provides a mechanism for generating random numbers.

The input to the flip-flop causes the meta-stable output of the flip-flop to be asynchronous with respect to the clock source. Thus, according to another aspect of the invention, a well-known synchronizing circuit is disclosed to synchronize the meta-stable output of the flip-flop with the clock source.

The synchronized output of the flip-flop is compared to an input waveform to determine if the output signal does not match the input signal, indicating a meta-stable state. When a meta-stable event is detected, an output bit is provided as a random bit.

According to a second embodiment of the invention, the time delay between meta-stable events can be used for the generation of a random number. While the first embodiment assumed that the meta-stable state will produce mistakes of ones or zeroes with an even distribution, a third embodiment assumes that meta-stability occurs more frequently with one binary value (either zero or one) for a given class of flip-flops. The third embodiment obtains an even random number distribution by "marking" half of the zeroes as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes." In addition, half of the ones are marked

as "ones" and the other half are marked as "zeroes". Thus, irrespective of the ratio of mistakes made in the zero state or the one state, the distribution of random output bits will remain even.

A fourth and fifth embodiment of the invention account for process variations, such as voltage or temperature, that affect the ability of a flip-flop to become meta-stable on a regular or reliable basis. The fourth embodiment of the invention adjusts the delay between the clock and the input to cause the meta-stable behavior more oftenthe fifth embodiment of the invention accounts for process variations by utilizing multiple circuits with n different flip-flops so that at least one of the n circuits will be meta-stable at a given time.

A more complete understanding of the present invention, as well as further features and advantages of the present invention, will be obtained by reference to the following detailed description and drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1A illustrates a conventional R-S latch;

FIG. 1B illustrates a conventional D-type flip-flop;

FIG. 2A illustrates a first embodiment of a random number generator in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2B illustrates a synchronizing circuit that may be utilized to synchronize the output of the random number generator of FIG. 2A with a clock source;

FIG. 2C illustrates a set of waveforms produced by the circuits of FIG. 2A and 2B;

FIG. 3 illustrates a second embodiment of the present invention that utilizes the time delay between mistakes to generate a random number;

FIG. 4A illustrates a random number generator in accordance with a third embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4B illustrates a synchronizing circuit that may be utilized to synchronize the output of the random number generator of FIG. 4A with a clock source;

FIG. 4C illustrates a set of waveforms produced by the circuits of FIG. 4A and 4B;

FIG. 5 illustrates a random number generator in accordance with a fourth embodiment of the present invention that adjusts the delay between the clock and the input to cause meta-stable behavior more often; and

FIG. 6 illustrates a random number generator in accordance with a fifth embodiment of the present invention

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 2A illustrates a first embodiment of a random number generator 200 in accordance with the present invention. The present invention recognizes that the meta-stable operation of a flip-flop represents a physical means for generating random numbers. It is noted that a flip-flop or latch can be fabricated that will become meta-stable on a regular or reliable basis, for example, by changing the parameters of the flip-flop itself in combination with violating the setup or hold times for an edge-triggered flip-flop.

According to a first embodiment of the present invention, a flip-flop 210 is clocked with an input that deliberately violates the setup or hold times (or both) of the flip-flop 210 to ensure meta-stable behavior. The setup or hold times can be violated, for example, using delays 215, 220. The flip-flop 210 can be embodied, for example, as a D, T or JK type flip-flop. In addition, the flip-flop 210 could be embodied as a simple latch 100 and a slightly different circuit, as would be apparent to a person of ordinary skill in the art.

A clock source is generated by a clock oscillator 230 and a D-type flip-flop 225 whose Qbar output is fed back into its D input. In this manner, the D-type flip-flop 225 operates in the same manner as a T-type flip-flop (toggled output), to provide a divide-by-two mechanism. Thus, the D input of the flip-flop 210 is driven by alternating ones and zeroes.

As seen most clearly in FIGS. 2A and 2C, the waveform Clock produced by the clock oscillator 230 is obtained at the sample point marked "Clock" in FIG. 2A. The waveform Input produced by the divide-by-two flip-flop 225 is obtained at the sample point marked "Input" in FIG. 2A. Likewise, the waveform Input_D produced by delay 215 and the waveform Input_clock produced by delay 220 are obtained at the corresponding sample points in FIG. 2A.

As shown in FIG. 2C, the violation of the setup or hold times (or both) by the delays 215, 220 ensures that the flip-flop 210 will exhibit meta-stable behavior, as demonstrated by the waveform Meta_stable_out. As discussed further below, the meta-stable operation of the flip-flop 210 provides a mechanism for generating random numbers.

As a result of the delay from the delays 215, 220, the inherent delay in the flip-flop 210 itself, and most importantly from the non-uniform delay from the meta-stable behavior, the waveform Meta_stable_out is not synchronized to the waveform Clock. Thus,

to make the random number generator 200 of FIG. 2A suitable for synchronous applications, an illustrative mechanism is provided in FIG. 2B to synchronize the waveform Meta_stable_out with the waveform Clock. It is noted that the circuitry of FIGS. 2A and 2B are connected by joining the bubbles of like letters.

The synchronizing circuitry 235 shown in FIG. 2B includes a number of serial flip-flops 240-242 that are selected so as to not enter a meta-stable state easily. In addition, if one of these flip-flops 240-242 does become meta-stable, the clock signal should be at a rate long enough that allows the output of the meta-stable flip-flop to settle, such that when the signal is sampled at the next flip-flop 240-242, the flip-flop is stable. In this manner, each flip-flop 240-242 improves the chance of synchronizing the waveform Meta_stable_out with the waveform Clock, while removing any meta-stability. Indeed, the chances of incorrect behavior for such a circuit will be measured in tens of years.

The exclusive or gate ("XOR") 250 compares the synchronized version of waveform Meta_stable_out with the waveform Input (sampled at the output of the divide-by-two flip-flop 225). Since the output of the XOR gate 250 will be high if and only if one input is high, the output of the XOR gate 250 ("Mistake") will be high if the waveform stable_out does not match the input signal. The output of the XOR gate 250 ("Mistake") is applied to the shift input of a shift register 260, and the shift register 260 will shift a bit over from the stable_out signal every time there is a Mistake. Thus, the first embodiment of the present invention collects a bit whenever there is an error (mistake).

It is noted that the first embodiment assumes that the meta-stable state will produce mistakes of ones or zeroes with an even distribution. It is again noted that if a random number generator does not produce ones and zeroes with an even distribution, the random number generator will have a bias.

According to a second embodiment of the present invention, the time delay between mistakes can be used for the generation of a random number. FIG. 3 illustrates synchronizing circuitry 300 that includes the same serial flip-flops 240-242 and XOR gate 250 as FIG. 2B. The synchronizing circuitry 300 of FIG. 3 operates in conjunction with the random number generator 200 of FIG. 2A. The serial flip-flops 240-242 operate in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2B to synchronize the waveform Meta_stable_out with the waveform Clock. The XOR gate 250 operates in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2B to generate the Mistake signal.

As shown in FIG. 3, the synchronizing circuitry 300 includes a divide-by-two flip-flop 310 and a counter 320 to measure the time between mistakes. The counter 320 may

be embodied, for example, as a four-bit counter. The least significant bits (LSBs) of the counter can be used to generate the random number. The counter 320 is sequentially turned on and off with each mistake. For example, for the waveforms shown in FIG. 2C, six clock cycles (binary=110) occur between mistakes zero and one. Thus, the binary counter 320 will generate a random bit of zero (LSB). More random bits can be extracted for each time interval provided a bias would not occur. Thus, we must not include bits that on average would appear more than fifty percent (50%) of the time. This would include any MSB that remains zero more than half of the time.

As previously indicated, the first embodiment assumed that the meta-stable state will produce mistakes of ones or zeroes with an even distribution. If experimental results show, however, that meta-stability occurs mostly on zeroes (or ones) for a given class of flip-flops (i.e., that mistakes are mostly obtained when the flip-flop input has a binary value of either zero or one), then an even distribution can be obtained by "marking" half of the zeroes as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes" and by "marking" half of the ones as "ones" and the other half of the ones as "zeroes." Thus, according to a third embodiment of the present invention, half of the zeroes in the waveform, Input, are marked as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes." Likewise, half of the ones in the waveform, Input, are marked as "ones" and the other half of the ones are marked as "zeroes." The illustrative embodiment assumes that mistakes are mostly obtained when the flip-flop input has a binary value of zero.

As shown in FIG. 4A, the random number generator 400 includes a flip-flop 210, delays 215, 220, a D-type flip-flop 225 and a clock oscillator 230 that operate in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2A. In addition, the random number generator 400 includes a divide-by-two flip-flop 410 that generates the Mark signal, shown in FIG. 4C, that marks half of the zeroes in the waveform, Input, as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes."

FIG. 4B illustrates synchronizing circuitry 450 that includes the same serial flip-flops 240-242, XOR gate 250 and shift register 260 as FIG. 2B. The synchronizing circuitry 450 of FIG. 4B operates in conjunction with the random number generator 400 of FIG. 4A. The serial flip-flops 240-242 operate in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2B to synchronize the waveform Meta_stable_out with the waveform Clock. The XOR gate 250 operates in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2B to generate the Mistake signal.

The output of the XOR gate 250 ("Mistake") is applied to the shift input of a shift register 260 in the same manner as FIG. 2B. While the input line was connected to the stable_out signal in the synchronizing circuitry of FIG. 2B, the input line of the synchronizing circuitry 450 is connected to the Mark signal. In this manner, each time there is a Mistake, the shift register 260 will shift a bit from the Mark signal. Thus, as shown in FIG. 4C, for mistake zero, a bit equal to zero (based on the Mark signal) will be acquired. Similarly, for mistake one, a bit equal to one (based on the Mark signal) will be acquired.

It is again noted that the random number generator 400 also marks the ones input to flip-flop 210 with a mark of either "one" or "zero". Thus, if a mistake occurs with the one state an even distribution of random bits will also be acquired due to mistakes made with the one state. Therefore, this circuit is insensitive to the bias between errors that occur in the one or zero state.

It has been found that process variations, such as voltage or temperature, can affect the ability of a flip-flop to become meta-stable on a regular or reliable basis. Thus, a fourth embodiment of the present invention, shown in FIG. 5, utilizes a random number generator 500 that adjusts the delay between the clock and the input to cause the meta-stable behavior more often As shown in FIG. 5, the random number generator 500 includes a flip-flop 210, a D-type flip-flop 225 and a clock oscillator 230 that operate in the same manner as described above in conjunction with FIG. 2A. In addition, the random number generator 500 includes variable delays 215-VAR, 220-VAR. These delays can be adjusted in real time to increase the number of mistakes and thus the productivity of the circuit.

Similarly, a fifth embodiment of the present invention, shown in FIG. 6, accounts for process variations by utilizing multiple circuits 610-1 through 610-n with different flip-flops so that at least one of the n circuits will be meta-stable at a given time. The selector 620 can be implemented in hardware or in softwareThe selector 620, for example, can select the flip-flop circuit 610 producing the most bits (if bits are being generated, the circuit 610 is in a meta-stable state).

It is noted that the third embodiment of the present invention, wherein half of the zeroes are "marked" as "ones" and the other half are marked as "zeroes," serves to prevent a bias in the generated random bits. It is also noted that biases can also be removed by applying an exclusive or operation to adjacent bits, in a manner well-known in the art. For example, if an XOR gate is provided for every two bits, the result will be one bit. Thus, the output has fewer bits (lower yield), but a more uniform random number distribution (less bias).

The random number generators disclosed herein should be reset to a known state before use (and not a meta-stable state). In addition, a counter can be implemented in the random number generators of the present invention to detect when the shift registers are full. Thus, the counter should be incremented each time there is a shift. The counter can generate a processor interrupt to retrieve the generated bits.

It is to be understood that the embodiments and variations shown and described herein are merely illustrative of the principles of this invention and that various modifications may be implemented by those skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

CLAIMS:

1. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:
- operating a flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210).

3. The method of claim 1, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210).

4. The method of claim 1, wherein said flip-flip (210) is constructed to be susceptible to becoming meta-stable.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein said generating step further comprises the step of setting a bit in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein the mistake signal causes a random bit to acquired.

7. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with a local clock source (230).

8. The method of claim 6, wherein a synchronizing circuit (235) that performs said synchronizing step is less susceptible to becoming meta-stable than said flip-flip.

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of collecting a plurality of said random bits to produce a random number.

10. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:

- operating a flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating at least one random bit based on the time between two or more meta-stable states.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210).

12. The method of claim 10, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210).

13. The method of claim 10, wherein said generating step further comprises the step of setting a bit in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input and determining the timing between the setting of said bits.

14. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step of synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with a local clock source (230).

15. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step of collecting a plurality of said random bits to produce a random number.

16. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:

- marking an input signal to a flip-flop (210) such that half of the zeroes are marked as zeroes and half of the zeroes are marked as ones;
- operating said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and

generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210).

18. The method of claim 16, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210).

19. The method of claim 16, wherein said generating step further comprises the step of setting a bit in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the mistake signal causes a random bit to acquired based on the marking input.

21. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step of synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with a local clock source (230).

22. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step of collecting a plurality of said random bits to produce a random number.

23. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:
- marking an input signal to a flip-flop (210) such that half of the ones are marked as zeroes and half of the ones are marked as ones;
- operating said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

24. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:
- marking an input signal to a flip-flop (210) such that half of the zeroes are marked as zeroes and half of the zeroes are marked as ones and half of the ones are marked as zeroes and half of the ones are marked as ones;
- operating said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

25. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:
- applying a variable delay to an input of a flip-flop (210), said variable delay violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210) and thereby placing said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein said generating step further comprises the step of setting a bit in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

27. The method of claim 25, further comprising the step of synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with a local clock source (230).

28. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:

- applying a variable delay to an input of a flip-flop (210), said variable delay violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210) and thereby placing said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein said generating step further comprises the step of setting a bit in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

30. The method of claim 28, further comprising the step of synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with a local clock source (230).

31. A method for generating a random number, comprising the steps of:

- operating a plurality of flip-flop (210)s in parallel, such that at least one of said flip-flop (210) is in a meta-stable state; and
- generating a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

32. A random number generator, comprising:

- a flip-flop (210) operated in a meta-stable state to generate a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

33. The random number generator of claim 32, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210).

34. The random number generator of claim 32, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210).

35. The random number generator of claim 32, wherein a bit is set in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

36. The random number generator of claim 32, further comprising a local clock source (230) and synchronizing circuitry (235) for synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with said local clock source (230).

37. The random number generator of claim 32, wherein a plurality of said random bits are collected to produce a random number.

38. A random number generator, comprising:
- a flip-flop (210) operated in a meta-stable state; and
- a counter for generating at least one random bit based on the time between two or more meta-stable states.

39. The random number generator of claim 38, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210).

40. The random number generator of claim 38, wherein said flip-flop (210) is placed in said meta-stable state by violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210).

41. The random number generator of claim 38, wherein a bit is set in a mistake signal if an output of said flip-flop (210) does not match an applied input.

42. The random number generator of claim 38, further comprising a local clock source (230) and synchronizing circuit (235) for synchronizing an output of said flip-flop (210) with said local clock source (230).

43. A random number generator, comprising:
- a flip-flop (210) operated in a meta-stable state;
- a marking circuit for marking an input signal to said flip-flop (210) such that half of the zeroes are marked as zeroes and half of the zeroes are marked as ones; and
- means for generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

44. A random number generator, comprising:

- a flip-flop (210) operated in a meta-stable state;
- a marking circuit for marking an input signal to said flip-flop (210) such that half of the ones are marked as zeroes and half of the ones are marked as ones; and
- means for generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

45. A random number generator, comprising:

- a flip-flop (210) operated in a meta-stable state;
- a marking circuit for marking an input signal to said flip-flop (210) such that half of the zeroes are marked as zeroes and half of the zeroes are marked as ones and half of the ones are marked as zeroes and half of the ones are marked as ones; and
- means for generating a random bit based on the meta-stable state.

46. A random number generator, comprising:

- a flip-flop (210); and
- a variable delay connected to at least one input of said flip-flop (210), said variable delay violating a set-up time of said flip-flop (210) and thereby placing said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state to generate a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

47. A random number generator, comprising:

- a flip-flop (210); and
- a variable delay connected to at least one input of said flip-flop (210), said variable delay violating a hold time of said flip-flop (210) and thereby placing said flip-flop (210) in a meta-stable state to generate a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

48. A random number generator, comprising:

- a plurality of flip-flop (210)s operated in parallel, such that at least one of said flip-flop (210)s is in a meta-stable state to generate a random bit based on said meta-stable state.

49. A random number generator, comprising:

- an input that receives an input signal that has a value of zero half of the time and a value of one half of the time; and

- a randomizing element that causes an error relative to said input signal, wherein said input signal is selected as a random bit whenever said error occurs.

50. The random number generator of claim 49, wherein said input signal is generated by marking half of the zeroes in a preliminary input signal as zeroes and half of the zeroes as ones and marking half of the ones in said preliminary input signal as zeroes and half of the ones as ones.

51. The random number generator of claim 50, wherein said random bit is acquired from said marked signal whenever said error occurs.

52. The random number generator of claim 49, wherein said randomizing element is a flip-flop (210) operating in a meta-stable state.

53. The random number generator of claim 49, wherein said error occurs when an output of said randomizing element does not match said input signal.

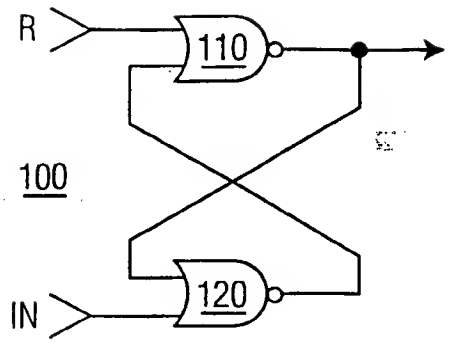

FIG. 1A

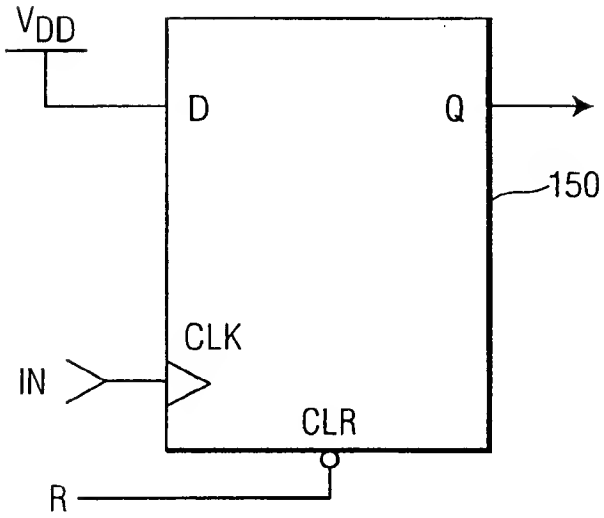

FIG. 1B

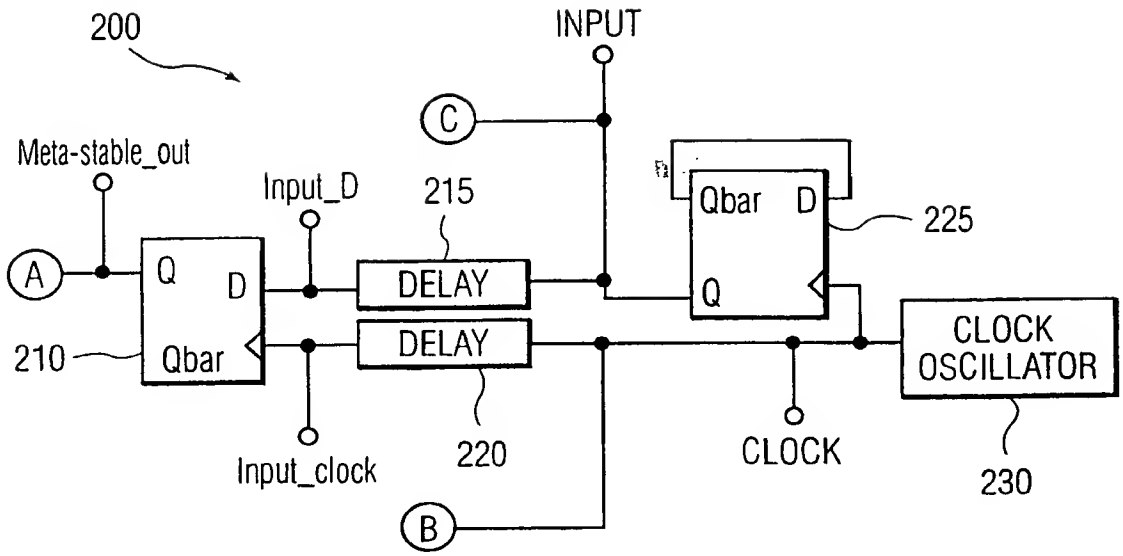
200
INPUT
C
Meta-stable_out
Input_D
215
Qbar D
225
A
Q D
DELAY
Q
210
Qbar
DELAY
CLOCK OSCILLATOR
Input_clock
220
CLOCK
230
B

FIG. 2A

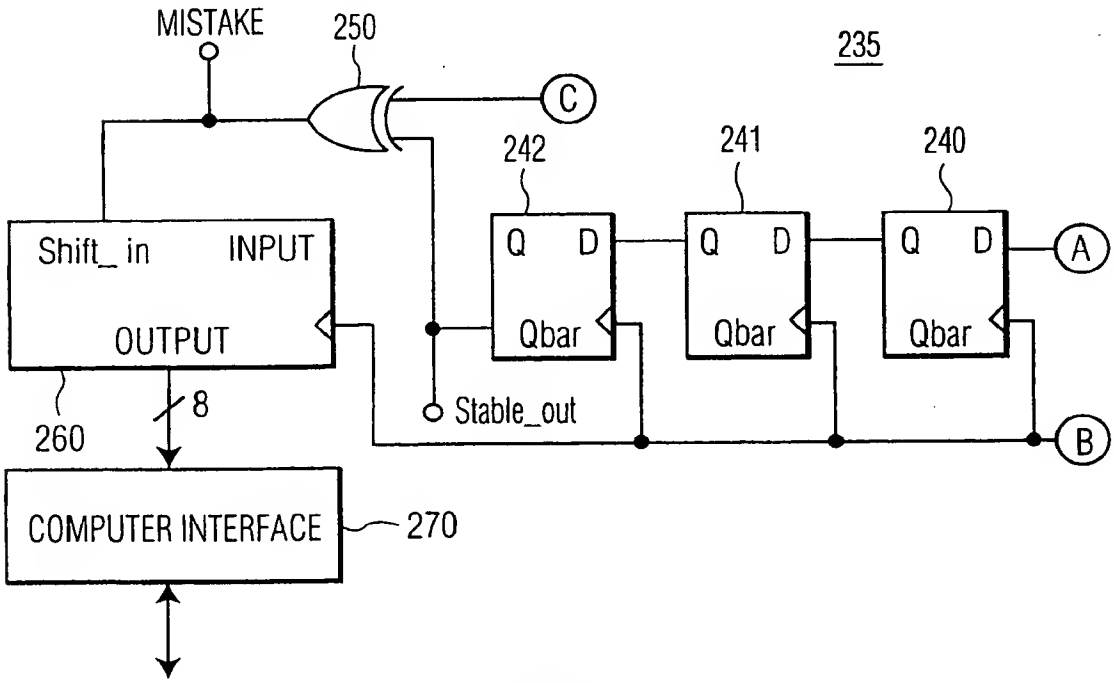
MISTAKE
250
235
C
242
241
240
Shift_ in
INPUT
Q D
Q D
Q D
A
OUTPUT
Qbar
Qbar
Qbar
260
8
Stable_out
B
COMPUTER INTERFACE
270

FIG. 2B

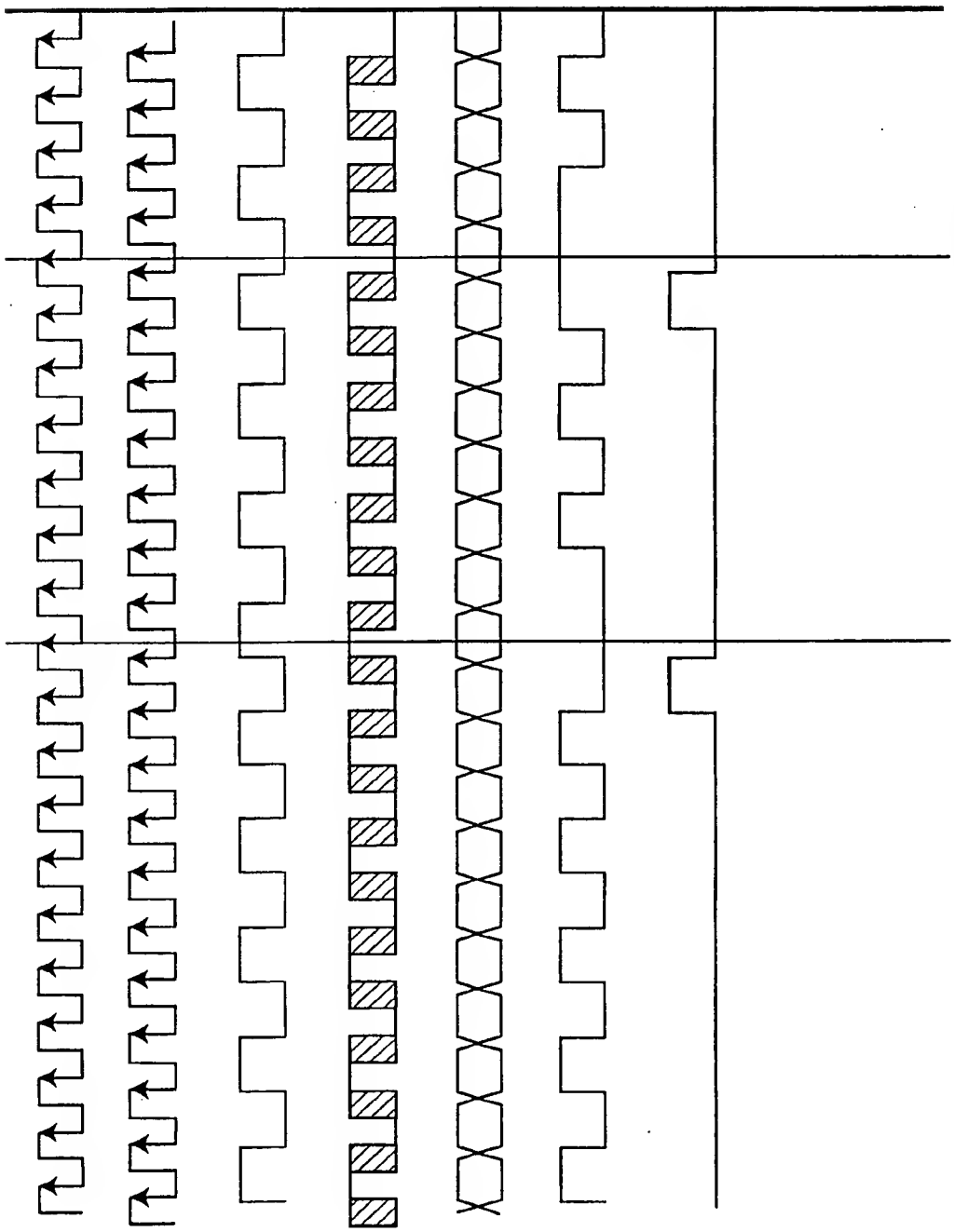

FIG. 2C

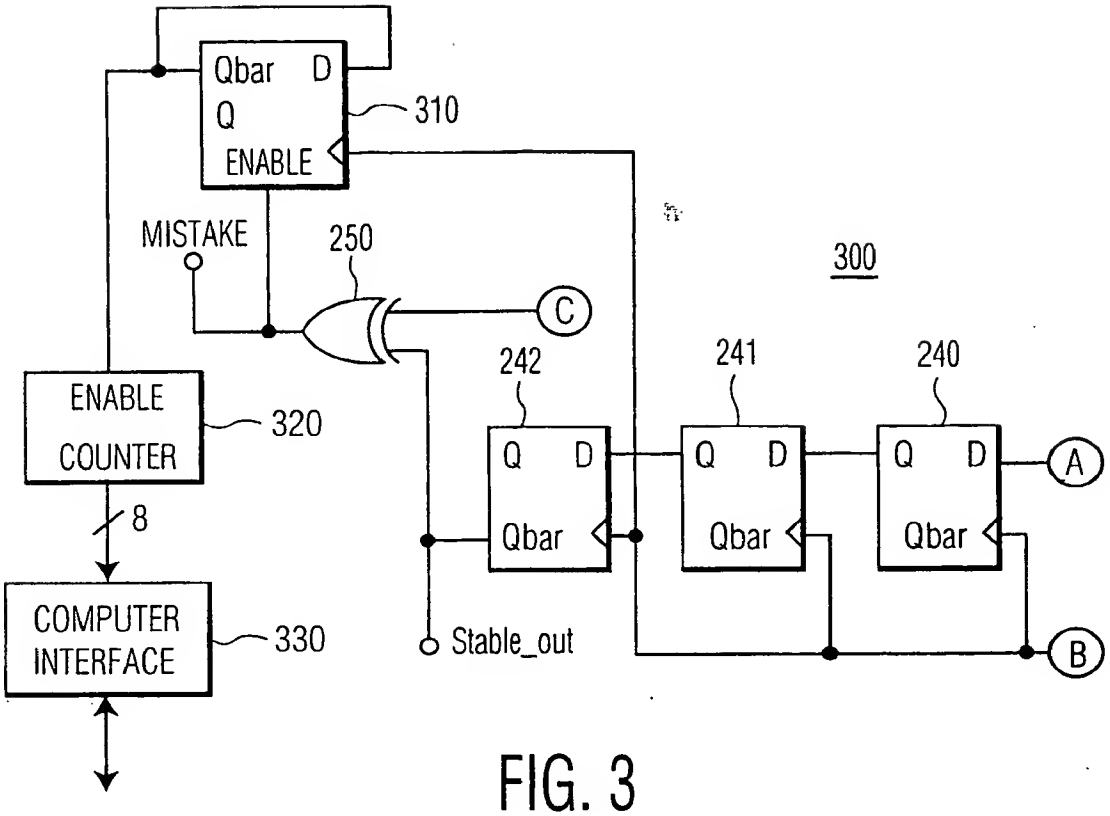

FIG. 3

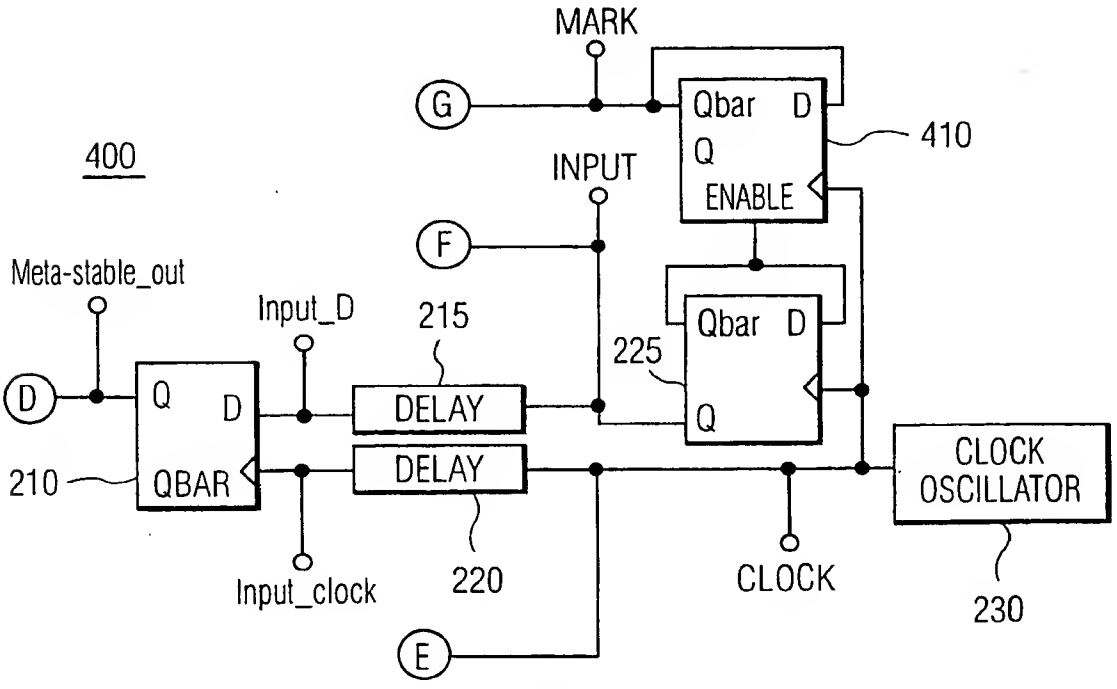

FIG. 4A

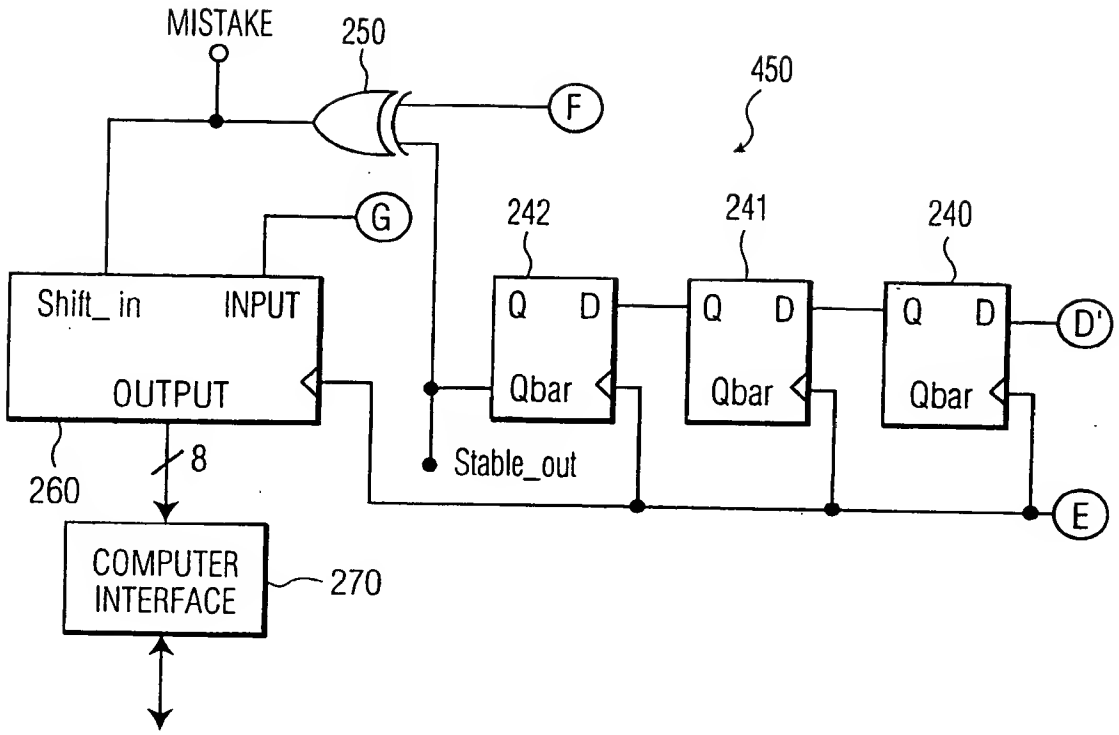

FIG. 4B

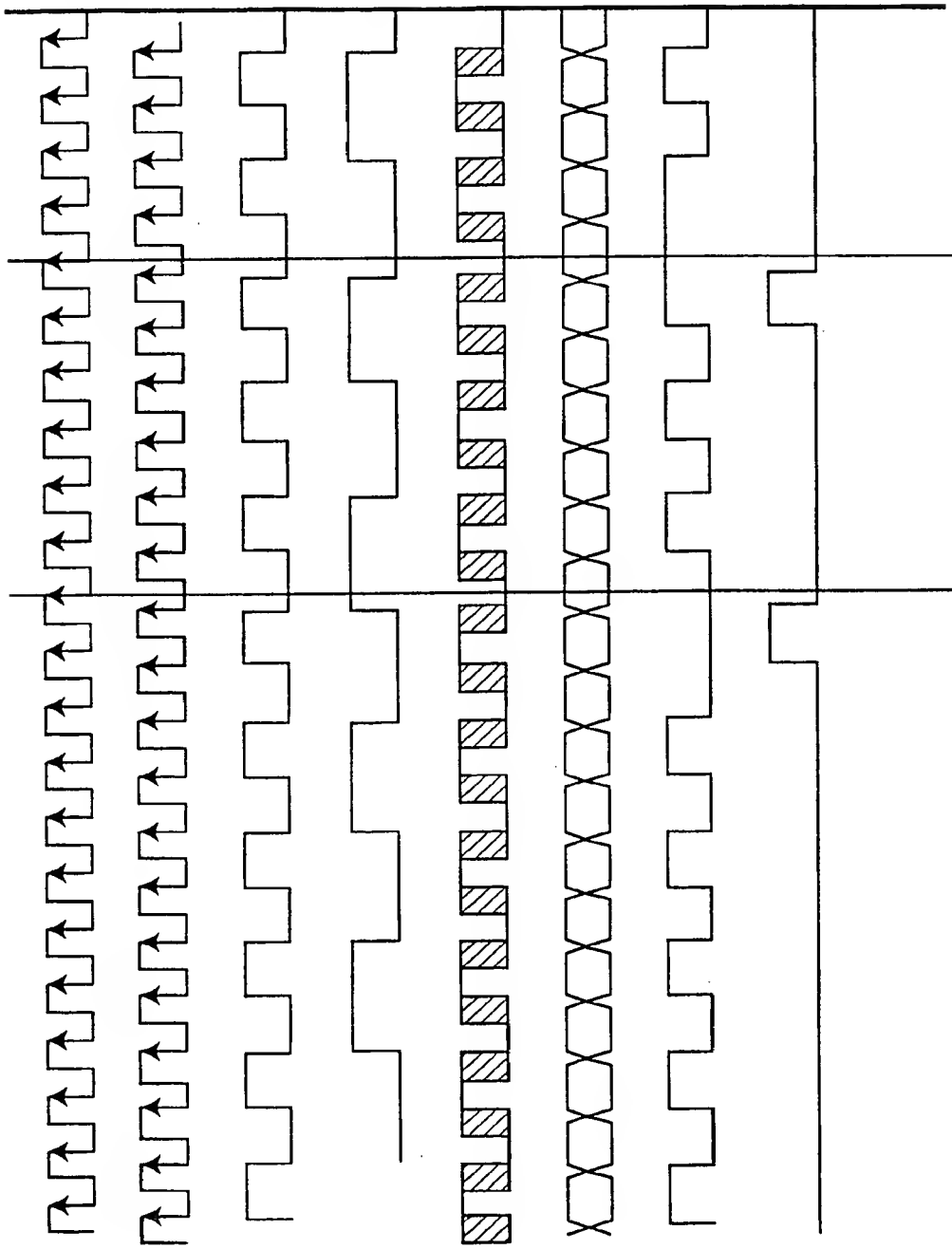
Clock
Input_clock
Input
Mark
Input_D
Meta-stable out
Stable_out
Mistake
MISTAKE ZERO
MISTAKE ONE

FIG. 4C

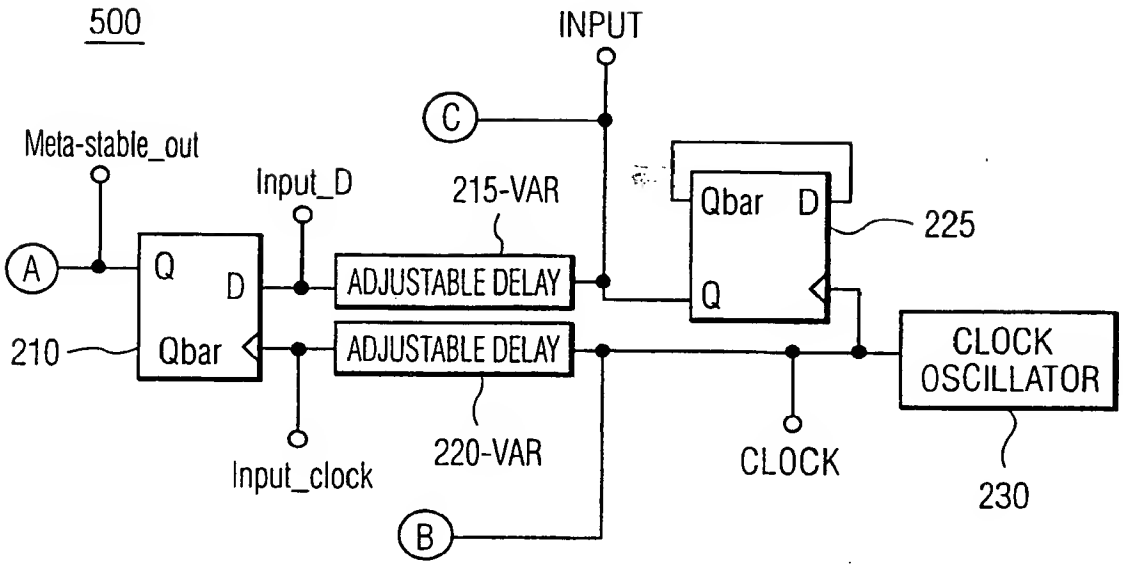

FIG. 5

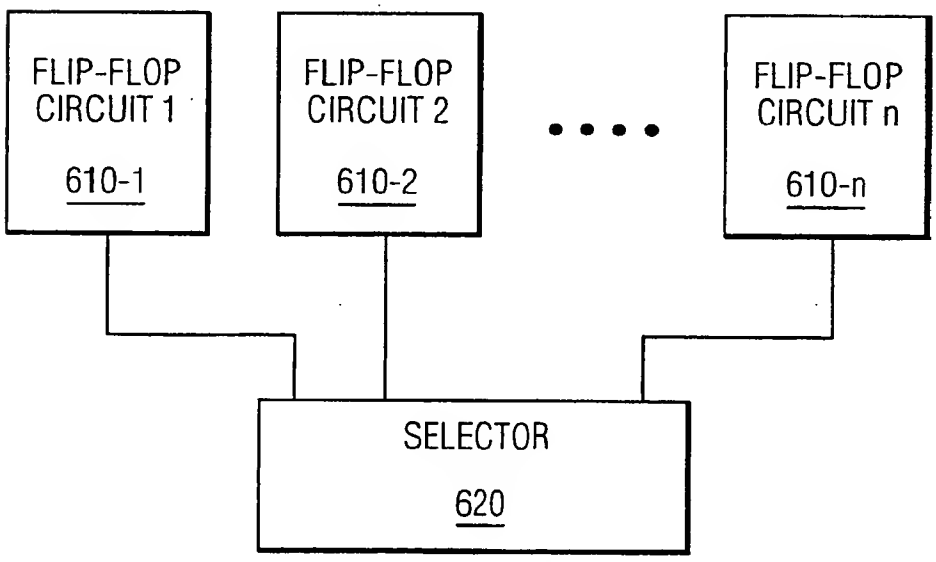

FIG. 6

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau

(43) International Publication Date
13 September 2001 (13.09.2001)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 01/67231 A3

(51) International Patent Classification[7]: G06F 7/58

(21) International Application Number: PCT/EP01/02428

(22) International Filing Date: 5 March 2001 (05.03.2001)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
09/519,549 6 March 2000 (06.03.2000) US

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(74) Agent: PETERS, Carl, H.: Internationaal Octrooibureau B.V., Prof Holstlaan 6, NL-5656 AA Eindhoven (NL).

(81) Designated States *(national)*: CN, JP, KR.

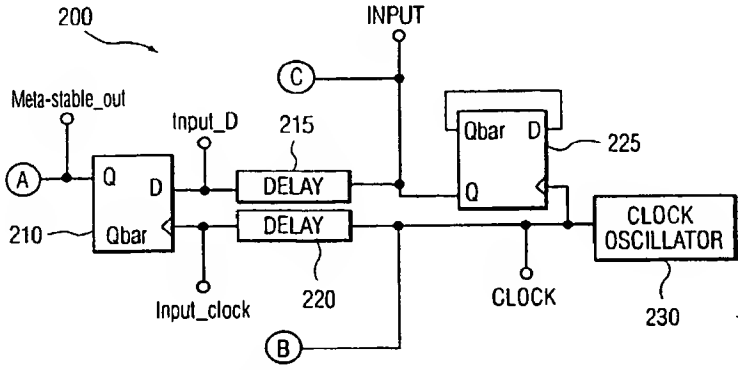
(84) Designated States *(regional)*: European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR).

Published:
— *with international search report*

(88) Date of publication of the international search report:
3 January 2002

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR GENERATING RANDOM NUMBERS USING FLIP-FLOP META-STABILITY



(57) Abstract: A method and apparatus are disclosed for generating random numbers using the meta-stable behavior of flip-flops. A flip-flop is clocked with an input that deliberately violates the setup or hold times (or both) of the flip-flop to ensure meta-stable behavior. The meta-stable operation of the flip-flop provides a mechanism for generating random numbers. The delayed input to the flip-flop causes the meta-stable output of the flip-flop to be asynchronous with the clock source. Thus, a synchronizing circuit is disclosed to synchronize the meta-stable output of the flip-flop with the clock source. The synchronized output of the flip-flop is compared to an input waveform to determine if the output signal does not match the input signal, indicating a meta-stable state. When a meta-stable event is detected an output bit is provided as a random bit. A second embodiment utilizes the time delay between mistakes to generate a random number. A third embodiment assumes that meta-stability occurs mostly on zeroes (or ones) for a given class of flip-flops and obtains an even random number distribution by "marking" half of the zeroes as "ones" and the other half of the zeroes as "zeroes." In addition, half of the ones are marked as "ones" and the other half of the ones are marked as "zeroes." A fourth embodiment account for process variations by adjusting the delay between the clock and the input to cause the meta-stable behavior more often. A fifth embodiment utilizes multiple circuits with n different flip-flops so that at least one of the n circuits will be meta-stable at a given time.

WO 01/67231 A3

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Intern ial Application No
PCT/EP 01/02428

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC 7 G06F7/58

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
IPC 7 G06F

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the International search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category °	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 5 963 104 A (BUER MARK LEONARD) 5 October 1999 (1999-10-05) abstract column 7, line 23 - line 29 column 7, line 55 - line 62	1-53
A	US 5 826 061 A (WALP PATRICK K) 20 October 1998 (1998-10-20) abstract column 7, line 7 -column 18, line 42	1-53
A	Philips Semiconductors, Application Note AN053, Geiwitz: 'The Philips metastable immune ABT22V10-7', 24 April 1995, Sunnyvale, CA, USA. XP002176380 page 2	1-53

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☒ Patent family members are listed in annex.

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Date of the actual completion of the International search	Date of mailing of the international search report
31 August 2001	14/09/2001

Name and mailing address of the ISA	Authorized officer
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

Intern ial Application No
PCT/EP 01/02428

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
US 5963104 A	05-10-1999	NONE	
US 5826061 A	20-10-1998	NONE	